

Exploring Collective Storytelling, Sexuality, and Diversification in Slash Fanfiction

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

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Abstract

Fanfiction is one of the most elusive yet intriguing forms of new online literacy. Writers of fanfiction take existing source texts from a variety of media, including but not limited to TV shows, books, movies and web comics, and create amateur stories around the characters and universes from their chosen media. Slash fanfiction, a subgenre of fanfiction, involves largely female writers pairing together characters and writing about their fictional relationships, sometimes explicitly or romantically, but not always. In this thesis, I will analyze how slash fanfiction writers tell their stories collectively, how they introduce sexual and gender diversity and significantly alter the original source text in ways that the original author could not have imagined. Ultimately, I will explore trends within the slash fanfiction community, and how they relate to society as a whole.

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Chapter 1: Overview

1. Introduction

Fanfiction is one of the fastest growing online media— Archive of Our Own, a fanfiction hosting website recently opened in 2008, has logged just under a million fanfictions since its inception (“Site Stats”). This intriguing online fiction has, in turn, sparked a burgeoning area of academic study over fanfiction and other fan works, often known as fan studies. Current fan studies research has looked at fanfiction from a copyright perspective, a sociological, psychological or biological perspective, and especially through the viewpoint of ever-growing and omnipotent popular culture. A smaller amount of fanfiction studies is devoted to slash fanfiction, a particular genre of fanfiction in which largely female writers write about characters in homosexual (and sometimes heterosexual) relationships. Slash fanfiction is enormously popular— on Archive of Our Own, slash fanfiction accounts for at least 170 thousand works, which only grows in number every day, as documented in Erin Webb’s dissertation, “Slash as a Genre” (17). As this genre of fanfiction represents a significant portion of fanfiction as whole, many fan studies researchers have written articles on the topic. However, most of these articles merely document the phenomenon of slash fanfiction and do not attempt to postulate why it happens— or worse, attempt to apply theories that do not incorporate the infinite variety of expression that slash fanfiction writers utilize. Others argue one or two reasons why this phenomenon happens, and neglect the fact slash fanfiction, like other social phenomenon, is the result of a multitude of underlying sexual and social trends.

In this vein, this thesis attempts to understand the reasons why female slash fanfiction writers are fascinated with writing two (or more) characters in homosexual relationships. As I believe slash fanfiction to be a matter of sociology and sexuality, I will examine the topic through this lens. The first three parts of this thesis will pinpoint the following sociocultural and sexuality elements behind slash

fanfiction: slash as experiential storytelling, slash as sexuality exploration, and slash as source text diversification. The final section of this thesis will put slash fanfiction into the contexts of its real world implications, such as sexual awareness, sexual diversity, and its impact on mainstream fiction and society. Ultimately, I aim to showcase slash fanfiction as a far more diverse genre in its content, readers and writers than any other research project thus far, and endeavor to illuminate the relationship between society, fanfiction and changing societal norms.

2. What is Fanfiction?

In terms of describing what fanfiction is, Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, authors of *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, offer the following definition: fanfiction is “the imaginative interpolations and extrapolations by fans of existing literary worlds” (14). Webb, in her dissertation, gives a similar definition, saying that fanfiction is “fiction produced and circulated non-commercially that appropriates its salient features (characters, settings, concepts) from commercial fiction or celebrity media” (iii). In other words, fanfiction includes any written work that is derivative or transformative of an existing work, typically produced non-commercially. What defines an “existing literary world” is somewhat tenuous, as fanfiction can be written about real people, such as members of rock bands, radio podcasts or even movie celebrities. Fanfiction can even be written on media, like TV shows, movies, literature and web comics. As Henry Jenkins, author of one of the first books on fan studies, *Textual Poachers*, remarks, “This group [fanfiction writers] embraces not a single text or even a single genre but many texts— American and British dramatic series, Hollywood genre films, comic books, Japanese animation, popular fiction” (1). Thus, fanfiction can be found for any variety of media, and often in many forms, appearing on many different websites, both online and offline. For the purposes of this thesis, however, I will assume that fanfiction is a written piece, frequently posted online but not always, and has some sort of connection to an already established world, no matter where this world may come from.

By using this rather broad definition, one may find that many famous pieces of historical literature happen to fall under the scope of the term fanfiction. The *Odyssey*, the *Iliad*, and the *Aeneid* are all pieces of fanfiction, as they are written about an existing mythological and perhaps historical worlds (Hellekson and Busse 14). Derivative stories about Sherlock Holmes, even TV shows and movies, can be considered fanfiction, as well the many reincarnations of the works of Jane Austen (Hellekson and Busse 14). Works such as Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Wicked* by Gregory Maguire, and E. L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* are more modern instances of fanfiction published by mainstream publishers (Hellekson and Busse 11).

Others, such as Webb, claim that only "deregulated, non-commercial" works are fanfiction, such as that of the grassroots, amateur-driven, online fanfiction that many are familiar with (17). It is arguably true that such published works as listed above do not necessarily have the same tropes utilized by fanfiction writers, they lack the romantic, queer pairings that many fanfiction pieces center around, and they are not collaboratively built around a fandom as fanfiction is. On the other hand, a case could be made that *Fifty Shades of Grey* has some fanfiction tropes and could have been written in a collective community when it was still a fanfiction piece. Other, self-published or small-press works blur the lines between commercial fiction and non-commercial fanfiction even further; original fiction slash, such as C. S. Pacat's *Captive Prince*, Jesse Hajicek's *The God Eaters*, and L. S. Baird's *Evensong's Heir*, share many of the same traits that fanfiction pieces do. Nevertheless, commercial examples of fanfiction will mostly be disregarded, as collectively written storytelling is an essential element of my thesis, and commercial works do not provably exhibit that element. The pieces I will be exploring all take advantage of a new channel through which to distribute their works: the internet.

Because of this new medium, the process and appreciation of fanfiction has transformed into a distinct culture, one which any can join. As Siobhan Lyons, in her presentation, "He Who Must Not Be Named- The Author and Online Fanfiction" remarks, "with internet technology, the rate of expansion of

fanfiction is such that... anybody with a computer [can] write a story... [and] hundreds of fans can read them and indulge in the continuation of the lives of their favorite characters" (1). In this fanfiction culture, both writers and readers gather around a trope, idea, genre or subgenre, existing world or work, or a particular character and create content. Catherine Tosenberger, author of the slash fanfiction article "Homosexuality in Hogwarts", notes that "Fan communities develop their own cultural norms for what is or is not acceptable in fanfiction" (190). In this way, fanfiction writers arrange themselves into groups based on mutual interests, and create self-perpetuating works to a set of ideas, pairings or even genres.

One of the most popular genres of fanfiction is that of slash fanfiction, or fanfiction that typically pairings two or more people into a relationship (Webb iii). Many apply this term only to male, homosexual relationships, reserving the term 'femslash' for lesbian relationships, while still others use the term slash more broadly to describe any type of relationship between established characters, be it homosexual or heterosexual. Early slash fanfiction researchers, such as Bacon-Smith, Penley and Jenkins documented the slash phenomenon as exclusively female writers composing only male homosexual slash. While the slash genre is still by and large written by female writers of various ages, it now includes a wide variety of sexual orientations, both of writers and of the characters they write. In this thesis, I will be using the term 'slash' to cover a wide variety of homosexual and heterosexual pairings, as delineating by male-on-male and female-on-female slash excludes other types of slash that I feel are represented within the genre. Furthermore, I feel that the trend of male-as-default occurring in the terms 'slash' and 'femslash' is problematic (a situation explored later in this thesis) and believe it best to simply label all forms as 'slash'.

Overall, slash fanfiction covers just about every topic and medium, and involves just about every character ever written, discussed or mentioned. Characters who are explicitly heterosexual are paired in homosexual relationships, and even boundaries of kinship do not matter to some fanfiction writers.

Furthermore, slash fanfiction writers break down any and all conventions, both within the given existing world and within the actual world— and do so with glee and zest. Almost nothing is taboo for slash fanfiction writers— “they can... find themselves a comfortable niche where they can explore their interests in a more-or-less nonjudgmental environment” (Tosenberger 191). While this may sound a bit like a literary bacchanalia, in truth, slash fanfiction writers thoughtfully and critically analyze social and sexual mores as much as they traipse through one sex scene to another (Tosenberger 189). Because of the vast exploratory nature of fanfiction, it is an excellent medium to analyze changing understandings of society and sexuality.

3. Discussion of Terminology

Before any serious research about slash fanfiction can be undertaken, a discussion about slash fanfiction terms must take place. These terms will be used throughout the thesis, not because of an academic obsession with jargon, but because many of the phenomenon and trends that occur in the slash fanfiction community cannot be described without the specific terms. All of these terms will be used as close as possible to the manner in which actual slash fanfiction writers use them, not only to give this work its authenticity, but to approach the topic of slash fanfiction as the writers themselves do. While the definitions of these terms are not precise and may be disputed academically, they are given to the reader as guidelines through which to understand the topic at hand. These terms are taken from Megan Freeman’s online article, “A Fanspeak Dictionary”. Although somewhat outdated, most of the terms are still accurate and keep to the original usage as described below.

One of the most important phenomenon slash fanfiction writers discuss, treat with and analyze is the differences between the established world and the fan-created world. To differentiate the two, fans call the established world as “canon” and the fan inspired one as “fanon” (Freeman par. 6, 21). Some fanfiction writers prefer to stick as closely as possible to canon, offering their fanfiction as

alternate possible scenes, or merely “behind the scenes” of what a reader does not see. An example of canon would be writing about Harry Potter and Ginny Weasley as a couple; in the Harry Potter books, these two characters are a couple, so writing them as one would not be a deviation from canon. Other fanfiction writers like to stick established characters in other worlds (also known as AU or Alternate Universe), completely rewrite the series from another character’s perspective, or ignore the canon and develop events as they see fit (Freeman par. 3). An example of fanon writing would be writing a sexual relationship between Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy, which does not exist in the original source material, but is promulgated frequently throughout the fan community. Later, when discussing experiential storytelling as a major element of slash fanfiction, the ideas of “canon” and “fanon” become crucial.

Two characters (or sometimes more) in a relationship in a fanfiction setting is called a pairing (Freeman par. 49). This is a crucial part of fanfiction as a whole, but especially in slash fanfiction, which relies on the “pairing” of two or more characters in relationships. Slash fanfiction writers operate around their favorite pairings, choosing only to write the ones they find sexually pleasing or interesting. How does a slash fanfiction reader or writer discover which pairings they like? Often, they construe the pairings from the source text, but it is more likely that they encounter a fanfiction which writes the two characters together believably and decide to perpetuate that pairing. The act of writing or performing slash fanfiction is called shipping (Freeman par. 57). If a particular fanfiction author likes a certain pairing, they “ship” the characters together. Lastly, the terms “fan community” and “fandom” may be used interchangeably, as they refer to the same thing: a group of fans bound together by particular interests in source material, genre, characters or other concepts (Freeman par. 20).

4. Review of Literature

Other researchers, of course, have realized fanfiction's potential as a cultural and societal litmus test, and have written a great deal on fanfiction and fan works in general. In terms of pioneers of fan studies, one must make acknowledgements towards Henry Jenkins and Camille Bacon-Smith. Jenkins' work, *Textual Poachers*, and Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* were both trail-blazers in early fan studies. Both texts put forth that fanfiction and other fan works had their own culture, and that by participating in this culture, fans were subverting traditional works in positive and transformative ways (Jenkins 2; Bacon-Smith 6). Jenkins looked at fans of TV shows and their fan works in general, while Bacon-Smith looked at female fans of TV shows who created fan works and went to fan conventions. Even though both of these works predate internet fanfiction, they are influential in describing the way in which fans subsume social, sexual and cultural barriers through their explorations of existing texts. While Bacon-Smith focuses on slash fanfiction zines, which are now mostly obsolete due to the internet, she does apply psychoanalysis to slash fanfiction writers and is one of the first to examine some of the underlying reasons why women write slash fanfiction.

Following closely on the heels of Jenkins and Bacon-Smith were Lisa Lewis's *The Adoring Audience*, and Constance Penley's "Feminism, Psychoanalysis and the Study of Popular Culture", which looked at specific, popular media fandom cultures and feminism interpretations of fandom cultures respectively. Bacon-Smith and Penley are also notable for some of the first descriptions of slash fanfiction and its community, albeit in its pre-internet form. Later works, such as Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse's *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, Matt Hills' *Fan Cultures* and Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* all take the internet into account on the discussion of fanfiction. Their voices add a more current dimension to the study of fanfiction after the advent of the internet.

While fewer academics focus on specifically on slash fanfiction, what lacks in quantity certainly makes up in quality. One of the most prolific writers on slash fanfiction is Catherine Tosenberger, who has written numerous articles on slash fanfiction, sexuality, and media-fandom interactions. Some of Tosenberger's most remarkable articles include her dissertation, "Potterotics: Harry Potter Fanfiction on the Internet", her follow-up article, "Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts: Harry Potter Slash Fanfiction", as well as her many articles on the Supernatural TV show and slash fanfiction, including, "The Epic Love Story of Sam and Dean". While Tosenberger often looks at fanfiction from a pedagogical or media literacy point of view, she also describes some of the reasons why slash fanfiction writers choose to write slash. In "Potterotics: Harry Potter Fanfiction on the Internet", she points out that academics often try to make "monolithic statements about why slash exists" without taking into account "fans' own multivocal understandings of their own activities" (Tosenberger 115-116). Tosenberger points out the strengths and fallacies of many previous and contemporary academics' understandings of the reasons behind slash, but is hesitant (and rightly so) to put forth a universal reason. For example, she admits that Bacon-Smith accurately describes the "subversive potential of slash", but paints the slash fanfiction writers in a negative light, portraying them as having "failed to live up to society expectations of heterosexual women... [they] were celibate, inexperienced... or morbidly obese" (Tosenberger 116; qtd. in Bacon-Smith 248). Tosenberger also mentions Anne Kustritz, who assigns the idea that slash is a "potential site of resistance to dominant ideologies of patriarchal, heteronormative culture" and Constance Penley, who adds to this idea by arguing that "slash as a subversive space" which creates a "fantasy of equality between romantic partners that is impossible in heterosexual relationships" (Tosenberger 117; qtd. in Penley 490). Ultimately, Tosenberger implies that while there are overall trends sociologically that may dictate why slash is written as a whole, to pin these ideas of subversion, space or sexuality onto individual fans is reductive and unhelpful to the study of slash (119).

Anne Kustritz, as mentioned above, offers more sociological and cultural explanations for why slash fanfiction exists. She proposes that fanfiction writers fill in voids—ones left by exonerated, inaccessible highbrow “art objects”, and overlooked by mainstream, patriarchal media, and then “alter these hegemonic messages to reflect their own needs, experiences, and desires” (Kustritz 374). Slash fanfiction is thus one of the many results of breaching these voids, as slash fanfiction writers “[prey] upon characters who reproduce traditional masculinity, traditional class and race hierarchies, and traditional [relationships] and reconfigures them into tales of communal societies, racial equality and sexual transgression” (Kustritz 376). Kustritz consigns this void as a result of inequalities in society, as does Constance Penley, in her article, “Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture”. Lyons, on the other hand, considers this void that Penley and Kustritz have described from a literary perspective. Lyons terms this void as “reading aporia” or the idea that there is “an incompleteness to a writer’s work that demands to be filled in by those other than an author” (2). This is an excellent perspective that none of the other authors consider, as it completely bypasses the idea of queer space and sexuality exploration that underpin Penley, Kustritz and even Tosenberger’s works.

The other definitive text on slash fanfiction not previously mentioned by Tosenberger is Erin Webb’s dissertation, “Slash as a Genre”. In this work, Webb applies genre definition theory to the culture of slash fanfiction. While Webb’s work is more concerned with categorical and social aspects of slash fanfiction, she describes in great detail the culture, people, literary moves and works that define slash fanfiction. She moreover postulates that fanfiction is a “socio-literary structure that replaces the broken [literary society] from which powerful, thoughtful female... fans were excluded” (Webb 21). Webb in turn argues against Jenkin’s claim that slash fanfiction is written because it reconfigures male sexuality (Webb 20). Whether or not a particular sexuality or gender is the progenitor of slash fanfiction is a significant argument within the slash fanfiction research community, one that figures strongly in almost all sources previously named.

For this reason, I have chosen to incorporate a wide variety of fanfiction research sources from various perspectives and backgrounds. Bacon-Smith and Penley represent psychological attitudes and ideas about slash fanfiction, while Jenkins' works often view slash fanfiction from a sociological standpoint, depending on when they were published. Others, such as Tosenberger, Webb, Kustritz, Lyons and Hellekson represent pop cultural studies takes on slash fanfiction in the advent of the internet. These newer works, are no more or less valuable than their predecessors in examining the sociocultural phenomenon of fanfiction; thus, sources from different decades and perspectives will be used in this thesis.

However, many of my arguments will more closely align with post-internet sources. Tosenberger's argument, for example, take into account that the internet produces fanfiction pieces of such variety and breadth that it would be misleading to apply reasons or theories to explain the entire phenomenon. In that, I both agree and disagree with Tosenberger. She is completely right about academic attempts to pin one or two reasons onto slash fanfiction. Her point that demanding all fans must write slash because a few write for a particular reason is also valid. Pigeon-holing slash fanfiction causes not only a misunderstanding of the vast complexity of slash and its writers, it also perpetuates stereotypes and assumptions about slash fanfiction writers, to the point of demeaning them. On the other hand, I believe it would be negligent to ignore the trends and reasons behind slash fanfiction and their potential as a depth marker to the rapid changes in sociological, sexual and cultural understandings occurring today, simply because of fear of poor portrayal. This idea, of course, will be the undertaking of my thesis.

In other cases, I will attempt to bridge the arguments from both pre-internet and post-internet sources. For instance, when the research of Penley, Kustritz and Lyons are taken together, they paint a far more complete picture of what underpins slash fanfiction than when viewed individually. Both Penley and Kustritz are correctly assume that slash fanfiction attempts to fill a void left by sexual

inequality in society. However, I do not think that either fully consider the implications of other reasons why slash fanfiction is written, and emphasize too heavily on the individual slash fanfiction writer and not enough on the slash fanfiction culture as a whole. Lyons, conversely, has addressed a third idea—of reading aporia— that fills in the gaps left behind by Penley and Kustritz’s arguments. I have therefore incorporated all three types of “voids” into my thesis, labelling them as experiential storytelling, sexuality exploration and source text diversification respectively.

5. Relevancy and Significance of Research

While there has been several academic articles that attempt to posit why slash fanfiction writers choose to write homosexual character relationships, most only offer one or two supposedly definitive “answers” to why slash fanfiction happens. Not only will I try to offer a broader range of answers, but I will also put these answers in context with sociological and sexual trends that happen in fanfiction, which ultimately represent larger social changes taking place today. I believe that slash fanfiction cannot be analyzed definitively unless its causes, effects, and ultimate impact on society can be discussed as well.

Lastly, this research is significant and should be undertaken because the study of slash fanfiction can be used to comprehend trends in mainstream literature, change public opinion, and alter understandings of sexualities. This process of transformation, in turn, develops a different view of sexuality and society in young people especially, but older adults as well. Thus, slash fanfiction can be used to predict what literature may look like in the future, what views of sexuality people will hold, and how society in general will accept non-heteronormative expressions. Furthermore, I will look at actual pieces of slash fanfiction, of various lengths and from different fandoms, and incorporate passages from these texts to improve the authenticity of my research and provide real world applications to the abstract ideas that I will present. Ultimately, this thesis will contextualize these real world slash

fanfiction pieces by exploring why they may have been written, and their social and sexual implications for society, as well.

Chapter 2: Experiential Storytelling

1. Introduction

Slash fanfiction writers use slash first and foremost as a tool to expand upon the existing universe of the source work they are inspired by. They explore beyond the canon of the work by creating new pairings, rewriting the text, or supplanting the text's original world with a new one. Their experiential storytelling supports sexual exploration and helps introduce sexual diversification, both of which will be discussed in the sections following this one. Understanding the power and components of experiential storytelling, moreover, gives a clearer representation of how slash fanfiction occurs naturally within fandom communities.

2. Collective Storytelling: How Fanfiction is Written

More than any other type of media, fanfiction is written immersed in a community which draws upon itself to create more works. The fanfiction community is self-perpetuating, self-referencing, and continually reinventing societal narratives. Individuals write their own narratives in the fandom, but they also write narratives collectively as a culture. These cultural narratives operate much the way stories like the *Odyssey* and the *Illiad* or the stories of King Arthur did; individuals contribute semi-anonymously to an ever-changing collective narrative, or what Hellekson and Busse term "collective storytelling" (14). Hellekson and Busse use this term to refer to the way in which fanfiction writing takes place in a community, centered around a text, and whose writers draw upon each other's texts, ideas and the source media to collectively create fan content. Hellekson and Busse specify that collective storytelling is the "rewriting of shared media" (14-15), but I will be arguing that the collective storytelling that happens in fanfiction is more like the *shared* rewriting of shared media

One of the most common ways in which fanfiction writers share their writing in fan communities is by operating as 'betas' or peer editing reviewers. These betas volunteer their services for free to

fanfiction writers and help the writer with grammatical issues, punctuation, or even story plotting, so that the piece of fanfiction is readable and entertaining to the fanfiction audience. Many betas are fans or fanfiction writers themselves, and will sometimes exchange works for reviewing. Rebecca Black, in her article, “Digital Design: English Language Learners and Reader Reviews in Online Fiction” remarks that “the online fan fiction site affords both author and readers opportunity to display diverse kinds of expertise that are... school-based literacy practices...” (116). The process of reviewing and adding to each other’s works not only displays elements of collective storytelling, but has also become a source of education about and practice of the written language.

Furthermore, the phenomenon of collective storytelling has several important implications for slash fanfiction and its writers. Slash fanfiction writers can propagate certain pairings from the source text, but they can also draw upon the numerous other slash fanfictions they have read to create completely new works. Slash fanfiction writer Val Mora, for example, explicates how she is a part of the collective storytelling phenomenon at the beginning of “To Unspool the Secrets”, a slash fanfiction from the *Thor* movie fandom. Val Mora writes:

I have been influenced by several authors, most obviously Llanval (Eidolon), godofpancakes (Dinerverse) and Aria (Shatter). There are some passages that are reminiscent of parts of circa1220bce’s “magic, lost and found,” but this fic was written before those chapters were posted, so any resemblance is merely a result of fandom zeitgeist” (“To Unspool the Secrets”, par. 1).

This “fandom zeitgeist” that Val Mora refers to is the collective process by which slash fanfiction writers and their readers generate ideas, universes and pairings. One fan will post a piece of art work, or talk about two characters, or write a small piece, which is then read by other writers, who pick up these ideas and change them to suit their own preferences, or add what they believe is missing. The result is

that hundreds of pieces of slash fanfiction may share thousands of ideas, universes and pairings between them. Val Mora thus refers to having read works by three other authors, and inspired by them, wrote a piece that shares many of the same ideas with others, albeit in the author's own, unique way.

The process of writing slash fanfiction, as with any other types of fanfiction, is a transformative experience. Slash fanfiction writers play off of each other, dedicate works to each other, borrow each other's ideas, and collectively rewrite societal narratives from the source texts they are inspired by. This laissez-faire culture is likely what allows slash fanfiction writers to ship characters that are not together canonically, and what encourages them to mess around with already established universes.

3. Creating Pairings

What does this open, collective tradition mean for pairings in slash fanfiction? A pairing created by one author may be mimicked by many others, thus determining what is popular in a fan community. A particularly well-written piece inspires many spin-offs and shifts the fandom towards a certain pairing, which could explain the popularity of male-on-male slash fanfiction over female-on-female slash fanfiction in a female writer dominated field. An excellent example of this is "Eidolon" by Llanval, a fanfiction also from the *Thor* movie fandom. Dating from June 2011, it was one of the earliest example of a frost giant Loki (termed Jötunn Loki by the fandom) and an Asgardian Thor ("Eidolon"). Its complex writing and interesting take on the pairing of Loki and Thor led to its fandom wide popularity; "Jötunn Loki" was given its own tag on *Archive of Our Own*, and at least 265 works use the tag, along with countless fanfictions hosted on other sites, drabbles, fanart, fanvids and other fanworks ("Works: Thor/Loki"). Multitudes of slash fanfiction writers in that particular fandom were inspired by Eidolon to create spin offs, tributes, and even reactions against it, further cementing the collective narrative within the mind of the fandom. For example, Battleroyale's cutting expose against the Jötunn Loki trope, titled "Jotun Loki 101, or Why Your Favourite Intersex Indian Harem Child Bride is Problematic" argues:

Jotun Loki has been a Thing in the Thor fandom for a while now, and some of the tropes that have been prevalent within fanon for a while are really quite problematic. The issues in the fan works range from writing, to art to cosplay.

While it's a positive that the fandom community has come to search for and explore inspirations for their work, the source material from which they draw upon has been increasingly exploited and has moved from appreciation into appropriation.

The design of Loki's Jotun form within fanon has been collectively acknowledged by a large part of the fan community ("Jotun Loki 101")

While another Tumblr blogger and fan, HausofOdin, responded:

I don't think Eidolon is solely responsible for the intersex trope, as there are enough independent reasons for it and it sort of sprang up as part of the tendency to conflate marvel!Loki with myth!Loki, among other things ("My Response").

Upon careful analysis, both of these responses treat the "fandom zeitgeist" as collective entity built out of a variety of fan works, such as fanfiction, fan art and fan cosplay. They both refer to different tropes, or the consistent, collective ideas, pairings or narratives in a fan community, and debate whether these collective ideas are problematic from a cultural, sexual or racial point of view. They contend on whether a pairing created is problematic, whether it should be more popular or less popular, and their feelings towards it. Larger fandoms, such as this one, have formed pairings so deeply engrained within the fandom that they become tropes. They then create platforms to discuss and analyze the collective storytelling elements, such as pairings, tropes, and collective narratives, that all of them participate in as members of that particular fan community.

4. Malleable as Clay: Rewriting the Source Texts

Some slash fanfiction writers use slash as a tool to rewrite the source text from a different viewpoint, or a different set of events, and explore the implications of this. This phenomenon is called many things: alternate universes, ret con, what-if scenarios, or parallel universes, and can be found in many different fanfictions and fandoms. In terms of slash fanfiction, however, writers usually use alternate universes to rewrite the existing universe with their favorite pairing. Two examples of alternate universes within slash fanfiction communities are “Cunning and Ambition” by MinaChao and “A Shot in the Dark” by Silver_Pup.

In “Cunning and Ambition”, MinaChao rewrites six of the seven Harry Potter books to reflect what would have happened if Harry was a Slytherin instead of a Gryffindor. She makes several other alterations: the Durselys are explicitly abusive, Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy are conflicted saviors, and Harry falls in love with Draco Malfoy. MinaChao guides her version of Harry Potter on a completely different trajectory, from cowering victim to a shrewd and intellectual individual with powerful enemies, even more powerful friends, and with Draco Malfoy, of course, as his lover. The author of “Cunning and Ambition” cleverly rearranges the world and events so that such a thing is possible, and even believable, as it would not be in the original source text. While many slash fanfiction writers do not go as far as to rewrite entire books to incorporate pairings, many do manipulate the existing universe in fascinating ways with equally engrossing results.

Another example of this is “A Shot in the Dark” by Silver_Pup, a rewrite of *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien. In this alternate universe slash fanfiction, the main character, Bilbo Baggins, is reincarnated and remembers the canon events of the original book, but acts in the fanfiction to prevent these events from happening. Ultimately, he significantly changes the experience of the quest and prevents quite a few deaths; but more importantly, he gets a chance to express his love for Thorin Oakenshield, the

dwarven hero and prince of the novel. Bilbo, in fact, runs away with the Arkenstone and the Ring of Power, two objects of temptation that wreaked havoc upon the world of Middle Earth in both *The Hobbit* and in *The Lord of the Rings*, and ends up accidentally defeating the dark lord Sauron in the process. The author, Silver_Pup, thus combines the events of both books in new and engaging ways, while having infinitely more space in which to develop the characters of Bilbo Baggins and Thorin Oakenshield, as well as their relationship. This allows the author to “fix” an existing universe to what they believe it should be, while adding modern nuances not present in the original source text.

Why did the authors MinaChao and Silver_Pup use alternate universes to incorporate slash pairings? As you’ll see later, there are a variety of possible reasons for the creation of slash fanfiction. Most slash fanfiction is written for fun, and for sexual pleasure. But slash fanfiction can also be driven by underlying forces: the need to introduce sexual diversity into non-diverse mainstream media, the need to explore sexuality and equality in relationships and a taste for subverting traditional heteronormative behaviors within society.

5. Conclusion

Slash fanfiction writers take advantage of the collective storytelling process within their fandom communities and can use it to create alternative universe, parallel worlds, or other scenarios in which their pairing of choice is possible. The open-nature of collective storytelling also allows slash fanfiction to introduce and explore a wide variety of differing sexualities that the source text has no room for. Ultimately, slash fanfiction writers now have the power to rapidly share pairings, sexual explorations, and ideas, which also allows them to construct collective cultural narratives within their fandoms.

Chapter 3: Slash as Sexuality Exploration

1. Introduction

For some fanfiction writers, slash provides an opportunity to explore their own sexuality, to subvert patriarchal, heteronormative society, or to write a relationship of sexual equals. In this section, each of these topics will be discussed through several examples of slash fanfiction writing, and related back to what current slash fanfiction scholars have to say on the topic. Then, these topics will be put into broader context of societal changes or understandings of sexuality. In some cases, research from other scholars will correlate with the examples I present, but in others, flaws, limitations in research, biases or misunderstandings will be pointed out. In this way, the examples of the slash fanfiction topic are explored first to illustrate its significance to the genre, assigned rigorous academic analysis, before finally put into context with society on whole.

However, before beginning the analysis portion of this section, I would like to add a caveat to the fanfiction that I have picked. I have chosen fanfiction pieces not only because they fit with the given topics, but also because of my own familiarity with either the piece, the genre, or source material. Obviously, this represents a serious bias in my work, but due to the nature of fanfiction and the internet, a definitive text, piece or authority on these topics cannot be claimed. I have chosen pieces that are no way representative of slash fanfiction as a whole, but are instead exemplary in their exploration of sexuality in the context of their characters or source material. I moreover insist on using real world, individual examples of fanfiction texts because so few academic articles on slash fanfiction use quotations from actual examples, a problem that I would like to remedy within my own work. This not only addresses issues of academic authority, but also improves the comprehension of readers outside of the slash community and culture.

2. Slash as a Sexuality Playground

In a media landscape overwrought with damning portrayals of sexual exploration and negative depictions of anything outside of bland heterosexual intercourse, slash fanfiction appears as the paradise of free and open sexuality. While slash fanfiction writers are amateurs and occasionally hampered by their incorrect information, stereotypes or insensitivity, by and large, slash fanfiction writers use the medium to cultivate a positive environment for sexual exploration. Slash fanfictions like the following examples of “Pins and Needles” and “Sign a New Agreement with iTunes”, present an extraordinary breadth, depth and variety of sexualities. These expressions of sexuality are further enhanced by the limitless nature of fanfiction and the internet. Whether or not this eventually correlates into a more gentle perception of sexual exploration and experimentation in society remains yet to be seen, but the mere existence of many sexually positive and exploratory works are certainly encouraging.

The fanfiction piece, “Pins and Needles” by Emerald Embers, is a perfect example of this dual, reciprocal sexuality exploration. “Pins and Needles” is based on the 2011 movie, *Thor*, but it also takes characters and ideas from the original Norse Mythology which inspired the movie (“Pins and Needles”). In the *Thor* movie, Loki was raised as an Asgardian (a culture vaguely Viking-esque in nature) by his adoptive parents. Loki later finds out that he was taken from his home planet Jotunheim during a war between his people, the frost giants, and the Asgardians. For fanfiction writers, this situation creates the idea of an interspecies, bi-cultural or bi-racial Loki, and accordingly, has interesting implications in terms of sexuality, racism, gender politics and colonialism. In “Pins and Needles”, Loki has discovered his frost giant heritage shortly before he is forced to marry another frost giant called Thrym, who is inspired by the Norse mythology character from the story *Thrymskvida* (“Pins and Needles” par. 1). Loki is wedded to Thrym in exchange for the return of his brother Thor’s magic hammer. In this fanfiction, Loki’s discovery and navigation of his own frost giant cultural heritage parallels his developing understanding

of his own sexuality, and the author uses the character Thrym to instigate this sexual and cultural awakening within Loki. The reader then identifies with the character of Loki and his examination of his sexuality becomes their own. Both Loki and the reader are thus able to explore sexuality in a safe, comfortable environment, unhindered by society's expectations for sexual behavior.

This mirrors what Tosenberger argues about slash fanfiction, in that it provides "the potential to encounter and experiment with alternative modes of sexual discourse" ("Homosexuality at Online Hogwarts" 187). In "Pins and Needles", the writer provides the "encounter" by re-imagining Loki as a bicultural person at war between his sexual and cultural identities. The "experiment", of course, is the sex scenes, but also Loki's changing understanding of himself and his sexuality. Loki begins the encounter with a particular set of assumptions about sexuality and sexual roles— "Thrym did not call him 'wife', nor 'husband' either, but Loki knew exactly which role for him had been bought by their marriage and would not pretend otherwise", which, not coincidentally, align with Western conservative, heteronormative roles and sexualities ("Pins and Needles" par. 10). In this particular piece, while Loki is intersexed, he has been taught by society to abide by strict gender and sexual roles, and therefore acts out the expected heterosexual, masculine role. However, through the course of the piece, Loki finds acceptance in his sexuality: "he let out a sob of relief. Of course. Of course he wasn't alone. Of course he wasn't deformed or monstrous" ("Pins and Needles" par. 46). His new husband, Thrym, is intersexed and transcends sexual and gender roles, and helps Loki feel comfortable in his own unique sexuality and gender. Loki thus learns to appreciate his sexual differences and explore his sexuality through the lens of his frost giant heritage. This, in turn, gives the reader a positive depiction of sexual exploration and non-heteronormative sexual acts, broadening their understanding of sexual exploration.

Not all forms of sexual exploration have to have aliens and otherworldly planets, though. A more mundane example of sexual exploration would be "Sign a New Agreement with iTunes" a fanfiction piece written by NuitdeNovembre, about two characters from the hit web comic and anime,

Axis Powers Hetalia. “Sign a New Agreement with iTunes” explores the sexualities of its two main characters, Francis Bonnefoy and Arthur Kirkland, in an alternate universe (AU) world outside of the contexts of the original series, allowing the two characters to live in the modern day world without incidences. In this piece, Francis Bonnefoy is a French expat living in Britain, attempting to write his graduate thesis on the history between France and England, while Arthur is a British musician who works part time at a records store. Francis and Arthur explore their changing relationship from roommates into lovers, negotiating sexuality and sexual behavior in a largely supportive, nonjudgmental environment. While some may argue that such a utopic environment does not exist, this piece shows that in absence of negative assumptions and expectations of sexuality, such relationships can flourish in a healthy manner.

The author furthermore expresses the characters’ sexualities without pretention or drama, but also without oversimplification; of Francis, they remark, “Francis’ girlfriends (or boyfriends, for that matter, but Francis’ boy-relationships tend to last longer than anything between one night and a week, and are therefore rarer)” (“Sign a New Agreement” par. 17). The author then describes Arthur’s sexuality, the other half of the relationship, as “a complicated matter. He considers himself as bisexual with a slight preference for girls... But then sometimes he falls in love with the sight of furling toes poking out from pooling jeans, regardless of gender” (“Sign a New Agreement” par. 24). Both Arthur and Francis exhibit a complex understanding of their own sexualities, their desires, and their willingness to explore, sometimes according to divisions of sexuality, but other times without them. They operate within what Tosenberger calls a “safe space” where both slash fanfiction writers and readers can be free from “institutionalized discourses of sexuality” (“Potterotics” 66). While “Sign a New Agreement with iTunes” hinges less on self-discovery of sexuality as “Pins and Needles” and focuses more on providing room for expression of such sexualities, both present human sexuality as a complex, but natural and beautiful.

The internet, for better or for worse, provides a perfect medium for people of all ages, genders and sexual orientations to explore their sexuality. For writers and readers of slash fanfiction, it becomes a platform where they can anonymously question their sexuality and discover new ways of expressing it. Writers can delve their own sexual desires and compose various what-if scenarios; but readers also receive benefit from reading slash fanfiction, as they navigate what they do and do not like, and discover their own burgeoning sexuality.

3. Slash Subversion

In addition to exploring sexuality, slash fanfiction writers also use the genre to subvert societal norms and comment on arbitrary sexual expectations. I will provide both an example of a piece that subverts restricting sexual norms and a counter-example that adheres to extreme power plays and possibly damaging sexual norms, in order to suggest that while many slash fanfiction pieces do subvert societal norms, others do not. While these two slash fanfiction pieces are from different series, genres, and subgenres, they both cause the reader to think and second-guess patriarchal heteronormative society and its sexual norms— even the counter-example may cause some readers to analyze how negative sexual norms play out in their lives. Together they are extraordinary examples of the subversive and not-so-subversive power of slash fanfiction.

“Winter and Spring”, written by Sinclair_Spirits, is another example from the *Thor* movie fanfiction community, but draws some of its inspiration from George R. R. Martin’s *Game of Thrones* series, as well as elements and characters from Norse mythology. In this lengthy but unfinished piece, the character Loki grows up as a frost giant on the ice planet of Jotunheim, the youngest son of a disgraced and dead king. Loki is given in arranged marriage to Thor, son of King Odin and heir to the throne of the planet Asgard. They are complete opposites in personality and behavior, and the two of them have quite a few misunderstandings about each other’s cultural and sexual norms. The piece is laid

out so that the culture of Asgard is analogous to Western culture and society, while Jotunheim follows looser sexual roles but stricter cultural norms. Jotunheim is thus portrayed as the “other” culture and stands as a deep contrast to Asgard. This, of course, creates many misunderstandings between Loki and Thor, thus allowing the reader to question the impact of traditional heteronormativity on in an environment removed from the real world. In this manner, “Winter and Spring” expertly uses the lens of foreign, alien cultures to subvert heteronormativity and raise questions about its role in our societies and cultures.

Kustritz reasons that slash fanfiction creates a “metatext”, or a communal system of creating and responding to a body of written texts, which “breaks strongly from normative traditions”, a concept that is well-represented in “Winter and Spring”. Within the structure of this fanfiction piece, the author forces the readers and characters alike to confront and deviate from “normative traditions” in matters social, sexual and cultural. One of the best examples of this deviation is during their wedding night, when Loki misunderstands Thor’s aggression and desire:

For Thor, [sex was] a primal exercise of power and dominance; he *enjoyed* intimidating Loki, flaunting his strength and size... He might take vicious delight in ruthlessly tormenting and teasing [Loki], but the prospect of bedding someone who was actually *terrified* was apparently unappealing (“Winter and Spring”, ch. 4).

In this quote, the author navigates issues of sexual consent so subtly that the reader may even miss it. Thor, arguably the aggressor and in the dominant sexual role, sees the absence of consent as unconscionable— and so too should the readers, the author hints. The author thus illustrates the difference between sexual aggression and sexual transgression, but also how easy it is for assumptions about sexuality to create an imbalance of power between two people. This puts the disempowered in a very precarious situation, where they must conform to society’s rules about sexuality or risk themselves

by attempting to break the traditions of their society. In this vein, “Winter and Spring” offers an arena in which highly-charged, sexual topics such as consent can be addressed within the slash fanfiction narrative. “Winter and Spring”, as well as many other slash fanfictions, use the subtext of their works to deviate from the cultural “metatext” that dominant, patriarchal heterosexuality demands.

While some slash fanfiction pieces like “Winter and Spring” do subvert to negative sexual roles and ideas, others adhere to them. “Chameleon”, written by Velvet_Mace, is an excellent counter-example. “Chameleon” is an amalgamation of the characters from BBC’s *Sherlock* with a well-known subgenre called Sentinel and Guide bonding, inspired by the TV show *Sentinel* but taken into an entirely different direction by fans. In this subgenre, characters are assigned a sexual role, with Sentinels being superior or aggressively dominant, and Guides as the submissive, lesser or weaker role. “Chameleon” introduces John Watson as a Guide who is forced to bond with a Sentinel and become trapped in a life revolving around this Sentinel with little to no choice over his previously free life. John Watson notes of the situation of Guides, “not being able to get a job, or move to a new town, or even get your own flat without some Sentinel’s approval? No rights of your own? Why would anyone want that?” a discourse that sounds rather similar to the plight of women in traditionalist societies (“Chameleon” ch. 1). By transposing sexual power dynamics and roles, consent issues, sexual aggression from heterosexual relationships onto homosexual relationships, this particular piece highlights their dangerous, and sometimes insidious nature.

This is both similar and different from what Jenkins, Kustritz and Webb argue about the subversive power of slash fanfiction. Jenkins, for instance, remarks that slash fanfiction “represents a reaction against the construction of male sexuality” but in the case of “Chameleon”, the aggressive, controlling model of male sexuality is actually aggravated, rather than subverted (189). This begs the question whether slash fanfiction subverts male sexuality or if it is subversive at all, as clearly not slash fanfiction portrays liberating sexual roles. Instead, Kustritz offers a different explanation for the

adhesion: men in slash fanfiction play two sexual roles simultaneously, that of trespassing aggression and of trapped submission, which mirrors current heterosexual roles and norms. This type of transference thus distances the problematic tropes from original context and thus allows readers to react to them in a safe environment. Kustritz further contends that slash fanfiction allows writers to “construct narratives that subvert patriarchy by re-appropriating [men] who usually reproduce women’s position of social disempowerment” (371). In other words, the act of empowering some men with aggressive sexuality and disempowering others within the context of slash fanfiction is subversive in and of itself. Kustritz then posits that this is achieved when stereotypical, patriarchal masculinity is replaced by more traditionally feminine traits of sensitivity, emotion and compassion (374, 376). However, I would like to claim that while such replacements do occur and are subversive, not all slash fanfiction replaces negative, stereotypical sexuality. Some slash fanfiction panders to negative sexual roles, like “Chameleon”. This not to say that such an act is not equally subversive. When assigning men arbitrary roles of sexual aggression and sexual passivity, the ridiculous and harmful nature of such roles becomes immediately apparent; there are no true differences between such men, only ones constructed by society. While some slash fanfiction writers might not be consciously aware of why assigning these roles feels liberating and yet transgressional, the subversion of sexual roles is there nevertheless.

4. Gender, Misogyny and Slash Fanfiction

Despite the many avenues for exploration and subversion that slash has, some would argue that many slash fans instead perpetuate only male-on-male pairings. It is true that slash fanfiction male-on-male pairings still account for approximately 62 percent of slash fanfiction on Archive of Our Own (“Tagged: M/M, F/M, F/F”). J. S. A Lowe, in her presentation, “A Notational Erotics: Locating Queer Female Desire in Supernatural Slash Fanfiction”, believes this is because of two issues-- internalized misogyny of the fandom and what she deems “an invisible female gaze” (slide 28). Lowe suggests that female slash writers are less inclined, even hostile towards pairings which involve women, and hold

attitudes such as "she's getting in the way of their love" or "I just wish she'd go away so that they can be together" towards female characters (slide 8). Lowe posits that female slash writers purposefully write male characters together rather than female characters because society deems these relationships between men as more powerful and more omnipresent than similar relationships between women, even pointing to Achilles and Patroclus' relationship in the *Illiad* as one of the many examples of male homoerotic relationships dominating the Western mindset (slide 11, 27). The second reason Lowe believes that female fans write male-on-male slash is so that they "can experience and engage [in] eroticism without risk, threat, or even being noticed" (slide 28). By removing all females from the narrative of relationships, slash fanfiction writers are thus removing themselves from their desires and out of the male sexual gaze.

Lowe brings up an excellent point-- female-on-female slash and other slash pairings seem to be left behind in comparison to their male-on-male counterparts. However, it is difficult to apply this theory to all parts of every slash fandom for several reasons. First, while misogyny may be present in some fan communities, it would be incorrect to apply it to all, especially among the fandom communities which either have a strong tradition of lesbian slash and other types of slash, or have a great variety of female characters to work with, which encourages more varieties of slash. Furthermore, Lowe specifically talks about the *Supernatural* fandom, whose source material is specifically focused on two male characters, rather than a multi-gendered cast, or a group of female characters. Because there is a lack of female characters in the source text to begin with, it may create an isolating effect that further deters slash writers from writing other types of slash.

A great example of a fandom where the variety of female characters and sexualities are markedly improved from Lowe's example is *The Legend of Korra*. In this American animated TV cartoon, the powerful main character Korra must use her supernatural, element-based powers to save the world alongside her friends. One of these friends is a young woman named Asami Sato, who runs her own

billion dollar company, and whose inventive genius is only matched by her compassionate nature and her ability for quick-thinking. Fans noticed the compatibility and complex relationship between Korra and Asami as early as 2012, during the first season, where both Asami and Korra were dating other men ("Works: Korra/Asami Sato"). Even then, slash fans were not dissuaded from writing fanfiction with this pairing. However, with the combination of the explosive finale, where they were officially paired by the creators of the show, and the enduring and positive nature of their relationship, the Korra/Asami pairing became extremely popular with slash fanfiction writers. Today, the Korra/Asami pairing counts for a little over twice as many as the next popular heterosexual pairing of Korra/Mako, and almost fifteen times more popular than the homosexual male pairing of Bolin/Iroh II on Archive of Our Own ("Works: The Legend of Korra").

5. Conclusion

Slash fanfiction can be written to explore different sexualities, to transform their understanding of a patriarchal, heteronormative society, or to subvert sexual norms. Writing slash fanfiction has the potential to help writers come to terms with a wide variety of sexuality performances and issues, ones that may not be addressed in mainstream society or media. It also gives slash fanfiction writers a chance to rebel against the norms of their society, either through subversion, exploration or aggravation. Overall, the platform of slash fanfiction offers the chance for a safe, nonjudgmental, and easily accessed venue to exploring a variety of sexual, social and cultural issues.

Chapter 4: Slash as Source Text Diversification

1. Introduction

Early fanfiction scholars, such as Penley, Bacon-Smith and Jenkins, have remarked extensively on the gender and sexuality demographics of slash fanfiction writers. Bacon-Smith, for example, paints slash fanfiction writers as “housewives and librarians, school-teachers and data input clerks, secretaries and professors of medieval literature” who write slash fanfiction “under the very noses of husbands and bosses” (3). Bacon-Smith restricts the demographics of slash fanfiction writers to middle class, educated, heterosexual women, who write largely homosexual slash. While Jenkins acknowledges that “straight, bisexual, and lesbian women” read and write slash, he only suggests that they read and write *homosexual* slash, rather than slash of other sexualities (191-192). However, neither Bacon-Smith nor Jenkins’ descriptions of the demographics of slash fanfiction writers are completely accurate today, as they have changed extensively over the last twenty years, and especially in the last several. Penley, perhaps, foresaw the beginnings of a demographic shift in slash fanfiction writers, reporting, and “So the almost completely female and heterosexual composition of the fandom may be breaking up in some interesting ways” (483).

While women are still predominately the writers of slash fanfiction, they are not necessarily heterosexual and they do not necessarily write monogamous, male-on-male slash fanfiction. As will be seen in this section, slash writers now write a variety of sexualities in their slash, including but not limited to homosexuality, asexuality, pansexuality, bisexuality and others. Even the original gender of the character no longer matters; many slash fanfiction writers ‘swap’ the genders of their characters (called genderbending), allowing even more complex explorations of sexuality and gender identity. In this way, slash introduces sexual diversity into mediums where such diversity is not typically found.

2. Statistics and Percentage of Sexual Diversity

First, it is crucial to explore why the insertion of sexual diversity into mainstream media via slash fanfiction is necessary at all. Kustritz, Tosenberger, Jenkins, Lyons, and others have already argued that slash fanfiction provides a platform for which writers can introduce ideas counter to patriarchal, capitalistic, heteronormative society. But why is this push-back necessary? As it turns out, the sexualities and stories that the slash community writes, reads and propagates are not present in mainstream media. Even a cursory glance at TV programming, films and young adult literature, among other media, shows that there is a consistent lack of diversity. GLAAD, an independent activist organization that works to promote LGBT+ issues, publishes a report every year on various diversities in American TV programming. The latest report, “2014: Where We are On TV”, states that “3.9% of series regulars will be lesbian, gay or bisexual characters” (GLAAD 3). While this percentage is down from 2012, there are “a total of 64 [LGBT+ characters] in the 2014-2015 season, up from 42 last year” (GLAAD 3). While this is certainly an improvement, there are still 781 straight characters to 32 LGBT+ characters in primetime TV today (GLAAD 4). On American TV, LGBT+ characters are not nearly as represented as their straight counterparts.

Young Adult literature, like television, has a powerful impact and reach in America, including movie franchises, merchandising and multi-million dollar book deals. However, in terms of sexual diversity, young adult literature seems to be equally disappointing— from 1996 to 2014, about 200 young adult novels featured LGBT+ main characters, according to the article “Criteria for the Selection of Young Adult Queer Literature” by Logan et al (qtd. in Wickens). While this may seem like a great deal, it is a paltry portion of the thousands of young adult novels published within that time period. In addition, young adult literature is also plagued by another problem that TV programming is not— a pedagogical mindset. Tosenberger rightly contends that young adult literature with LGBT+ characters are often hindered in their nuances because of the need for “ ‘correct’ attitudes about sexuality to an audience

deemed in need of education" ("Homosexuality at Online Hogwarts" 188). While characters are can express sexual diversity in young adult literature more freely than on television shows, they are still hampered by arbitrary boundaries set by publishers, literary authorities, and societal standards.

The film industry is even worse than either young adult literature or television shows in terms of sexual diversity. Jason Low, co-publisher of Lee and Low Books, a company dedicated to producing diverse children's books, compiled information on diversity in the top one hundred science fiction and fantasy movies. According to his findings, none of these movies had a LGBT+ protagonist, only 12% had a female protagonist, and 8% had a racially diverse protagonist (Low par. 2). While this is only a small portion of films made in America, it is particularly damning that none of the films considered to be the "best of the best" have any diversity to speak of, let alone sexual diversity. And in science-fiction and fantasy films, which should have more license to go against societal norms, no diversity can be found.

3. Fanfiction Writers Fill in the Gaps

The lack of sexual diversity in a wide variety of media is problematic not only because of media's influence on people's daily lives, but representation helps people find acceptance with themselves. Media reflects the opinions and viewpoints of society at large, but it can also be used to introduce or change ideas of the population. This, of course, makes it a crucial tool towards helping society accept differing sexualities. Furthermore, people of different sexualities who find accurate and positive representations of themselves in media navigate society better and are arguably more happy (Logan et al 30-31).

Amongst the disappointing portrayals in media, where does fanfiction stack up? Because fanfiction is less concerned about correct and pedagogical portrayals or making money, it expresses sexualities differently. As Lyons and Kurstriz have remarked previously, fanfiction writers take advantage of the gaps in media for a variety of reasons. While Lyons posits that slash fanfiction writers fill this gap

by extending the story, and Kustritz argues that it is filled by subversion, slash fanfiction writers can also use this gap to add in sexual diversity where there is none. Part of this may be because, as Logan et al above mention, people want to see themselves and their sexualities represented in the media that they watch (32). Slash fanfiction writers take this matter into their own hands and create sexual diversity where there is none. This not only allows them and readers to explore different sexualities, but also gives them a chance to deliver a nuanced portrayal of characters that otherwise does not exist.

An excellent example of this the Dwalin/Nori fandom, a fairly recent pairing based on two minor characters in Tolkien's *Hobbit* series. Dwalin and Nori are both dwarves in the company of Thorin Oakenshield, on a quest to regain the dwarves' ancient home from a dragon, and between the two them, they only have a few lines in the movies, and are mentioned only a few times in the book. Neither of these characters have much screen time, and they hardly interact with each other at all. However, as per usual in the slash fanfiction community, this matters very little; numerous writers have pitted both characters together, and written a variety of works reimagining these characters as lovers, with a multitude of genders and sexualities. In Thorinsmut's "Bad Decisions", Dwalin and Nori are lesbian lovers, but in HattedHedgehog's "Thief's Clever Finger", they retain their original genders and become gay lovers instead. To further confuse matters, in Blue_Sparkle's "Storm Clouds", Nori remains male, while Dwalin becomes female. The act of re-assigning various genders to the dwarves in Tolkien's works is particularly key because of the significant absence of female dwarves, and female characters, in general, within Tolkien's universe. But writers from the fandom also manage to introduce less well-known queer sexualities, such as asexuality and bisexuality, into the *Hobbit* universe. Neyiea's "Two of a Kind" for example, is a short but sweet AU universe piece with Thorin Oakenshield and Bilbo Baggins in an asexual partnership, while HannahJane's "Honor Among Thieves", a heist AU, features a female bisexual Nori and a female lesbian Bilbo Baggins. Although these combinations are perhaps rarer than others, they exist in far more frequency within fandoms than within traditional media. But what is truly

extraordinary is the fact that these slash fanfiction writers have injected fluid gender identities and inserted a splendid variety of sexuality into works that were written long before gender and sexual politics were even recognized, let alone understood.

These five slash fanfiction authors are no exception. The Hobbit fandom on Archive of Our Own, which represents at least 17,000 works, 58 percent are male-on-male pairings, followed 23 percent heterosexual, 2 percent female-on-female pairings, and 7 percent “multi” or “other” (“The Hobbit: Works”). While female-on-female slash is less well represented in this particular fandom, there are still far more sexual diversity in fanfiction fandoms, such as *The Hobbit*, than there are in more traditional media, such as television, movies or young adult literature. Even though male-character oriented fandoms such as The Hobbit and Supernatural tend to have more male-on-male pairings, they are still by far more diverse in sexual pairings than traditional media. Moreover, unlike in TV shows and other media, if readers cannot find a pairing or piece they find pleasing (a rare situation given the expansive nature of the internet), they can write their own. Fanfiction communities can easily be changed or re-oriented based on the almost ceaseless contributions from their readers and writers.

4. Conclusion

Slash fanfiction has changed dramatically since its beginnings, and now represents a diverse variety of sexualities beyond male-on-male slash. While early slash fanfiction researchers argued that the genre was almost exclusively the domain of middle class, heterosexual women, the art of slash fanfiction now belongs to women (and some men) of a variety of sexual expression, from all walks of life and socioeconomic classes. Yet, just as in early slash fanfiction attempts, slash fanfiction writers still have a chance to fill the gaps left by TV, movies, and literature by expressing sexuality narratives not constrained by society or media.

Chapter 5: Conclusions of Research

1. Brief Review of Topics Covered

In this paper, I have researched and elucidated slash fanfiction through the lenses of collective storytelling, sexual exploration and source text diversification. In many cases, the results of my research were similar to that past and contemporary slash fanfiction research endeavors. But in other cases, I have encountered information that suggests trends opposite of other research projects, or information that is otherwise lacking and unmentioned in those projects. Findings of the latter kind will be explored in depth in this section, along with speculation on the implications of these findings in both the fandom and in society at large.

2. Collective Storytelling: Implications

Ideas about authorship and collaboration are changing extensively, and collective storytelling in fanfiction is at the forefront of this change. Source texts are no longer considered static objects to be consumed and then discarded—fanfiction writers play, manipulate and alter the source texts in an incredible variety of ways. They mold events and characters in surprising new ways, ways which open the door for sexual exploration and sexual orientation diversification. Many fanfiction writers create nuances and depth not present in the original works or foreseen by the original author of the source text. Collective storytelling in fanfiction also provides a platform where people are willing to engage in literacy and writing of their own volition. Thousands of writers online act as betas and edit fanfiction for grammar, content and structure, while thousands of readers comment and critique fanfiction pieces. Many hundreds of thousands more write novel-length epics for nothing other than the pleasure of doing so.

Despite its intriguing nature and implications, research in the collective storytelling element of fanfiction is understudied, and collective storytelling in slash fanfiction even more so. While Hellekson

and Busse have made mention to the phenomenon in their work, *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* and Rebecca Black has described it in her study, “Digital Design: English Language Learners and Reader Reviews in Online Fiction”, these only serve to note that collective storytelling is a part of fanfiction, and do not attempt to understand why it happens or how it effects the writing of fanfiction. Furthermore, collective storytelling in slash fanfiction has some interesting implications in terms of creating pairings, the popularity of certain fanfiction works and the propagation of tropes within the community that should be explored more thoroughly. In the future, collaborative, interactive writing maybe become just as common as more traditional writing, as technology continues to test the limits of fiction and literature. Overall, collective storytelling is a fundamental element of slash fanfiction and deserves just as much attention and research as the more typically studied sexual sociology does.

3. Sexual Exploration and Subversion: Implications

Slash fanfiction provides the perfect site for people of all ages to explore sexuality without judgement. Slash fanfiction allows both writers and readers to create a variety of works with characters of an infinite number of sexual and gender expressions. This, of course, is one of the most notable aspects of fanfiction as a genre, and is perhaps one of the most prominently discussed in academic sources. Tosenberger, Kurstritz and others have researched about slash fanfiction’s potential for subversion and sexual exploration, deeming them powerful forces against societal sexual norms and patriarchal oppression. But I have also included the dark side of slash fanfiction that is not often discussed in academic projects: writers can just as easily adhere to patriarchal sexual normativity as they do subvert it, and not every slash fanfiction piece is an act of subversion.

I have also researched the idea of relationship equality, or the idea that slash fanfiction can provide positive relationship role models in some cases. This was an implication I did not find in any of the research that I consulted, and I believe it to be just as important as sexual exploration and

subversion. In the same vein, not every piece of slash fanfiction provides a desirable or healthy expression of sexual relationships, but many do have far better examples than those found in mainstream media. Further research on how slash fanfiction alters young people's perceptions of healthy relationships should be undertaken, as well as its connection to mainstream media.

4. Source Text Diversification: Implications

On the topic of source text diversification, my own research diverged quite significantly from academic studies and articles. Slash fanfiction has grown and changed in many ways since Camille Bacon-Smith and Henry Jenkins first wrote about the topic. Slash fanfiction now incorporates a huge variety of sexualities beyond male-on-male pairings, such as lesbian, bisexual or even genderbent heterosexual pairings, and much more. While the majority of slash fanfiction writers are still female, they are no longer mostly identify as heterosexual. Slash fanfiction has become an online, world-wide phenomenon and is more well-known in mainstream and academic societies today than it has ever been. TV shows such as *Sherlock* and *Supernatural* have made references to slash fanfiction, and even Amazon has considered making a profit from the publication of fanfiction works, with its Kindle Worlds program. As Amazon buys the rights to copyrighted work, and splitting royalties between the source text, the fanfiction author, and Amazon itself, blurring the lines between commercial and non-commercial fiction. Such ventures will continue to alter the understanding of what fanfiction is and how it impacts society over all. My research therefore updates not only the demographics of the slash fanfiction community and societal perception of slash fanfiction, but offers suggestions on what slash fanfiction may become.

5. Effect on Mainstream Fiction and Media

Fanfiction writers are often the writers of the future-- they are the gauge by which we can guess where literature in decades to come will go. Many young people read slash fanfiction, and it alters their

expectations of what should be in mainstream fiction and media—and many of these young readers may in turn become authors themselves. The popularity of mainstream slash literature, such as C. S. Pacat's *Captive Prince* series, *Ash* and *Huntress* by Malinda Lo and L. S. Baird's *Evensong's Heir* has provided some evidence that understandings of sexuality and romance are changing within mainstream fiction, and that new writers are taking a different approach to sexual diversity. Even *Fifty Shades of Grey*, while a poor example of original slash fiction, does suggest that more online fanfiction-esque works will make their way into mainstream bookstores. In the future, slash-type literature could be just as prominent as the romance genre is today, as well as make in-roads into other genres, such as science-fiction, fantasy, supernatural and horror. Just as slash fanfiction has grown into a deeply introspective and provocative genre, so too may original slash literature may become as thought-provoking as it is sensual.

6. Effect on Society at Large

Slash fanfiction is so vast and anonymous by nature that one cannot draw clear connections from it to larger trends of acceptance and positivity in sexual diversity within society. However, it is this very nature that makes slash fanfiction such a potent, mysterious force: any person with a computer and an internet connection can be opened to a world rich in sexual exploration and human expression. There are no fees or locational boundaries, and even content warnings do not keep out most people from writing and reading slash fanfiction. It lies at the crossroads of information technology and popular culture, at the fringes of mainstream media, and has unknown, unprecedented participation across language and cultural barriers. While it is impossible to pinpoint slash fanfiction as either a cause or a result of increased tolerance for sexual diversity, it is difficult to deny its potential and reach.

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